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ABSTRACT

The "Electronic Media Career Preparation Study" was conducted by the Roper Organization to represent an attempt to put many industry concerns about academia into a more formalized context. Broadcasters in the Roper study suggested that colleges and universities do an inadequate job in providing students with practical knowledge and in giving hands-on experience. Another major concern expressed by the broadcasters was that students leaving colleges and universities today have unrealistic career expectations regarding starting salary, job advancement, and misguided impressions of the industry. One of the pleasant outcomes of the Roper study was an apparent willingness expressed by broadcasters to help support the development of media education. The discussion prompted by the Roper study could lead to genuine progress once the mutual misconceptions are overcome. Academics should recognize the key role played by industry involvement and should better appreciate the pressures of daily media production and media economics. Broadcasters should learn to understand bettter the role of a university and should work to recognize the political and practical constraints of the university setting. Broadcasters should continue efforts to produce and air the best possible programs which become models for aspiring broadcasters and create challenging standards for students to meet. (Sixteen footnotes are included.) (MG)

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BEYOND THE ROPER REPORT: MAINTAINING GOALS TO EDUCATE (NOT TRAIN) STUDENTS

"Debut" paper to BEA Courses and Curricula Committee

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BEYOND THE ROPER REPORT: MAINTAINING GOALS TO EDUCATE (NOT TRAIN) STUDENTS

Considering how "education bashing" has been so much in vogue recently, the results of the "Electronic Media Career Preparation Study" by the Roper Organization could hardly be considered surprising. The perceptions registered by the broadcast executives surveyed are probably quite accurate in that they closely follow those expressions academics have heard for several years at various professional industry conferences where educators and professionals meet. The Roper study, sponsored by various professional media organizations,1 represents an attempt to put many industry concerns about academia into a more formalized context. Basically, the broadcasters surveyed are critical of university media education programs for failing to provide students enough "hands-on" training for application in the broadcasting work world. The broadcasters are also concerned that media students develop unrealistic career expectations from university faculty who have too little awareness themselves of what happens in the "real world" of professional broadcasting.2

In spite of these rather pointed criticisms, it appears unlikely that the Roper results will actually spark a sweeping renovation of university media education curricula. For one

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1The three major organizations commissioning the study were the International Radio and Television Society, The Radio-Television News Directors Association, and The National Association of Television Program Executives. The Gannett Foundation provided additional funding for the study.

2For a summary of the results, see "Electronic Media Career Preparation Study: Executive Summary," The Roper Organization Inc., December, 1987.

thing, academics are already challenging the effectiveness of the research methods used in conducting the study.3 Probably more crucial, however, is a sense by academics that professional broadcasters have geared a study and lodged criticisms within a framework that demonstrates the broadcasters' misconceptions of what a college education should philosophically (and reasonably) be expected to accomplish. But educators should avoid simply dismissing the Roper study as so much harping. Regardless of the possible flaws in couching or conducting the project, educators should still be able to recognize the underlying emotion, negative as it might be, professional broadcasters have for this matter of media education. For this reason, academics owe the broadcast industry a response that engages the practitioners in dialogue, and makes a genuine effort to orient broadcasters to the "real world" of today's students and the "real world" of the institutions that educate those students. The Roper study, in this sense, then could become the springboard for the academic community to return service with a message of its own. Now might be an influential time to rephrase the argument that adapting our media education programs solely to cater to industry desires for ready-made help would be a disservice to the university, our students, and in the long run, even to the industry itself.

3James E. Fletcher, "The 'Electronic Media Career Preparation Study' as Research," Feedback, vol. 29, no. 3, Summer, 1988, p.15.

THE MISSION OF MASS COMMUNICATION EDUCATORS IN THE UNIVERSITY SETTING

Broadcasters suggest in the Roper study that colleges and universities do an inadequate job in "providing students with practical knowledge for the real world" and in giving "hands-on experience."4 This perspective seems rather ironic in light of the published advice provided by the RTNDA, one of the sponsors of the study. A booklet designed for prospective students of broadcast news advises students that a "broad, liberal education should come first in your college or university program." The booklet further advises students to "Avoid the trade school approach....It's easier to teach skills to an educated person on the job than to educate a skilled practitioner who missed out on a liberal arts education in school."5 Respected industry leaders like Ed Bliss have called for faculty to resist the pressure to teach practical skills at the expense of thinking and writing.6 And attendees at the 1987 RTNDA convention applauded roundly at Ted Koppel's suggestion that journalism schools be closed down,

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4"Electronic Media Career Preparation Study: Executive Summary," p.7.

5Vernon A. Stone, "Careers in Broadcast News," fifth edition, Radio-Television News Directors Association, Washington, D.C., 1987.

6Ed Bliss, remarks to the Broadcast Education Association convention, Dallas, Texas, April, 1987.

and universities instead be used "to teach academic courses."7

There is an apparent schizophrenia among broadcast professionals as to what they expect colleges to deliver. While providing lip service to the liberal arts education perspective, broadcasters continue to seek new hires based largely on practical experience. The "help wanted" sections of industry publications provide ample evidence of this practical emphasis. A recent RTNDA job bulletin included a listing for a photojournalist who could "shoot, edit, and drive a stick shift."8 (They just lost my top five graduates from last year.)

This practical "edit and drive a stick shift" mentality confronts the very mission of higher education. Mission statements of virtually every institution deal first with educating the "whole student." Students are educated to think, to reason, and to express themselves in a variety of content areas. The liberal arts educational approach, supposedly endorsed by broadcast professionals, makes no assumptions of career paths. A liberally educated person might major in psychology, history, economics, or...mass communication. These majors do not necessarily all become psychologists, historians, or economists. But their breadth of understanding makes these students worthy of pursuing a variety of careers that require reasoning and self-expression. Law schools, medical schools, MBA

7Ted Koppel, remarks to the Radio-Television News Directors Association convention, Orlando, Florida, September, 1987.

8RTNDA "Job Information Service," Job Bulletin 514, June, 1988.

programs, and teacher education programs all accept students from a variety of liberal arts disciplines. But broadcasters all too often only consider students with practical skills. With this approach, it is little wonder that broadcasters are not getting the best and brightest students out of the universities.

Professional broadcasters might easily challenge this liberal arts approach as merely an "education for educations sake" situation. But this is not the case. Universities educate students today with the full understanding that the average American will change careers three times in a lifetime and work for ten different employers. To educate (or worse yet, to train) students narrowly is a disservice to students who need to know more about the process of learning than about any particular content concern. None of this is to say that the content of media study cannot efficiently carry out this process function. It certainly can.9 But a purely skills-driven approach to mass communication education diminishes the utility of the student both for non-media, and eventually media-related careers. Of all careers, people in the media industry need a broad educational background. Media practitioners need understanding in expression, sociology, literature, business, etc. Broadcasters report in Roper that they perceive students are receiving a "well-rounded liberal arts education."10 If that is the case,

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9see Jeffrey M. McCall, "Sharing the Responsibility of Media Literacy -- Reaching Out to Other Disciplines," ACA Bulletin, issue #64, April, 1988, p.34-40.

10The Roper study, executive summary, p.8.

broadcasters can be satisfied that the universities are accomplishing their academic missions.

The educational arena today is filled with calls to get back to basics. Faculty in traditional disciplines have taken the offensive in challenging fields of study with heavier vocational elements. The departments of journalism and mass communication are among those most frequently scrutinized.11 If mass communication educators indeed were to, follow broadcaster recommendations to increase the hands-on or training component of media study, they would only further jeopardize their situation in the campus political and philosophical struggles. Lou Prato has called for the development of what he calls "courses that integrate technical training within the pure academic curriculum."12 But this appears to be a self-contradictory approach and would likely meet with the same skepticism from the university community most broadcast courses already face.

Basically, the industry criticism that universities deserve a grade of "C" for preparing students for entry level jobs is inappropriate. The charge improperly assumes that the mission of universities is to train people for entry level positions. The

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11For additional insight on this topic, see Willard D. Rowland, "The Role of Journalism and Media Studies in the New Era of Disciplinary Realignments," p.58-65, and Robert O. Blanchard and William G. Christ, "Professional and Liberal Education: An Agenda for Journalism and Mass Communication Education," p.3-9, both in ACA Bulletin, issue #64, April, 1988.

12Lou Prato, "Why RTNDA Undertook the Roper Project," RTNDA Communicator, April, 1988, p.10.

charge also overlooks that breadth of learning can help entry level employees someday become sound managers and supervisors. It is unfair to judge universities narrowly when their objectives are much broader. Is it fair to say John Elway is a lousy football player because he does not tackle well?

APPLYING EXPECTATIONS OF TODAY'S STUDENTS TO THE BROADCAST INDUSTRY

A major concern expressed by broadcasters in the Roper study was that students leaving colleges and universities today have unrealistic career expectations, such as "...they expect too high a starting salary; they expect to advance too quickly; and they come to the job with a misguided impression of the industry."13 These claims are perhaps true enough. But these student expectations are quite typical for college students of the 1980's who expect suitable salaries, working conditions, and stability.14 Is it not just as unrealistic for broadcasters to expect students to want low salaries and to advance slowly. Three-fourths of 1987 graduates from a midwest liberal arts institution went to their first job to earn over fifteen thousand

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13The Roper study, executive summary, p.7.

14See, for example, Sandra E. LaMarre and David M. Hopkins, Career Values of the New Lifestyle Professionals, the CPC Foundation, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, 1984.

dollars a year.15 Starting salaries for most media jobs will not be competitive in this environment. If broadcasters want the top students, they must avoid simply rationalizing away this problem by saying that students who would pass up a media career for money are somehow unfit anyway, or that salaries must always be low because that is the nature of the industry. Recruiters from competing fields like public relations, government, personnel, and corporate communications want students with an understanding of the communication process, and are willing to recruit on campus and offer money that broadcasters can't or won't. A top student can hardly be blamed for accepting a communication-related position that offers better working conditions and benefits. And if the top students are lured away, broadcasters are left to hire from among the next category of students.

It also appears unrealistic for broadcasters to complain that students have unrealistic impressions of the broadcast industry. The unrealistic expectations of media students can hardly be any worse than the unrealistic expectations of students going into law, education, or any other career. Eighteen to twenty-two year old students do not have the advantage of looking at the industry from the perspective of a seasoned professional. In addition, the student impression of the industry appears to be based to a large degree on what they

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15DePauw University Class of 1987 Follow-up Survey, Career Planning and Placement Center, DePauw University, Greencastle, IN. Figures do not include students who went on to graduate and professional programs.

have seen and heard on the air for the eighteen years before they came to college. Many faculty would agree that the stargazing students who leave campus were stargazers when they arrived.

THE ROLE TO BE PLAYED BY PROFESSIONAL BROADCASTERS

One of the pleasant outcomes of the Roper study was an apparent willingness expressed by broadcasters to help support the development of media education. It is important, however, that broadcaster efforts be directed in a useful fashion, and not in demanding that their agenda for more practical training be met as a condition to participation. For better or worse, what happens at a university is done on university turf. And no matter how negatively broadcasters perceive the career preparation students receive, the broadcasters will still have to rely to a large degree on the products of universities. It is a disturbing fact that broadcaster respondents in the survey said "that the most important thing that higher education can do to improve...is expose students to people who have recent experience or are currently employed in the electronic media."16 Such a conclusion is problematic on several accounts. First, it proposes a rather simple solution for a multi-faceted situation. Next, it offers an inflated sense that only real-world people can offer useful perspectives on the state of mass mediated performance today. This approach is incestuous and represents a

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16The Roper study, executive summary, p.5.

resistance to the change and scrutiny that can come from a non-industry perspective. Of course, the insights of practitioners are essential, and virtually all university media programs employ professors with that vantage. Important? Yes. Most important? - probably not. The academic setting traditionally has been a place to engage in criticism and research. This role can and should be conducted at times outside direct professional contact, and it is hoped that professionals could be able to appreciate the varying perspectives provided.

Professional broadcasters can proact on the education of media students in a variety of ways. The internship situation has been discussed in a roundabout fashion for years, but the quality and consistency of most intern programs is still marginal. It would seem that professional stations are best situated to provide the kind of real-world orientation they say students are missing. A concerted effort by broadcasters could alleviate internship - related problems -- availability, supervision, compensation, level of involvement, etc. Such an effort would require substantial sacrifices of energy, time, and resources. But a broader industry attack on this matter would demonstrate to academia the professional commitment to supporting students, rather than ignoring or using them. Surely, the students, industry, and academic community would all be better off to have a more open and uniform system of giving students direct professional exposure. The same proactive approaches can be undertaken in having professionals express their availability

to visit campuses, in providing faculty the opportunities to participate in a professional setting, or in sponsoring student scholarships, etc. Essentially, there are plenty of support measures to implement that would help generate closer professional-academia ties.

In addition, the broadcast industry can initiate movement to make broadcast employment more attractive for top students. Sure, there will always be enough students to fill the positions, but are they the best prospects available? To get the best students, broadcasters should work to create work opportunities the equal of those found in fields competing for the same prospects. Few broadcasters have programs to identify and recruit top students, and instead, rely on the grapevine or magazine want-ads. Broadcasters who want top graduates must aggressively pursue those students through on-campus recruiting or sponsorship of job fairs, just like most other industries already do. Broadcasters can also work to improve conditions and salaries. This is an era where college graduates have certain compensation expectations, and they will gravitate to those opportunities that meet those expectations. Attracting good people to the broadcast industry is clearly the responsibility of broadcast executives.

Overall, broadcasters and academics must maintain the discussion prompted by the Roper study. The discussion can lead to genuine progress once the mutual misconceptions can be overcome. Academics should recognize the key role that can be

played by industry involvement. Academics can also better appreciate the pressures of daily media production and media economics. Broadcasters, on the other hand, can learn to better understand the role of a university as not being a vocational clearinghouse. They can also work to recognize the political and practical constraints of the university setting, where reason does not always lead to administrative action. Finally, broadcasters can continue efforts to produce and air the best possible programs. Those programs become the models for aspiring broadcasters and create challenging standards for students to meet.